

# Songs Enhance Learner Involvement: Materials Development

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*By Regina Suk Mei Lo and Henry Chi Fai Li*

The value of songs in motivating students to learn English and enhancing learner involvement is widely acknowledged by ESL practitioners (Reeve & Williamson, 1987; Giudice, 1986). Teachers and students alike find singing songs entertaining and relaxing. Songs offer a change from the routine procedures in the classroom. They are invaluable tools to develop students' language abilities in listening, speaking, reading and writing and can be used to teach a variety of language items such as sentence patterns, vocabulary, pronunciation, rhythms, adjectives, adverbs and so on. Learning English through songs also provides a non-threatening atmosphere for students, who usually have great tension when speaking English in a formal classroom setting.

Although the communicative approach has become the mainstream in language teaching, learners are still very passive recipients of knowledge and play only a minimal role in the selection of learning materials and teaching methodology. Such under involvement constitutes a hindrance to successful language learning. In order to enhance learner commitment, learners should take part in developing materials for themselves. Clarke (1989) outlines some advantages in involving learners in materials development through modifying existing materials. This not only increases learner commitment but also makes learners become experts in the tasks they designed.

This article presents a number of classroom activities which combine the use of songs and materials development by learners to show how learner involvement can be maximized by engaging learners in meaningful task design and the efficient exploitation of songs.

## **Materials Development through Songs**

Here are five classroom activities using songs as the chief materials for teaching. The design consists of teachers going through the language tasks with students based on the lyrics of the songs. On completion of the teacher session, students are asked to construct similar tasks in groups using songs of their own choice and do a mini-presentation of their work to the class in another session. They are required to indicate clearly which language items their tasks are designed for practice. The tasks in the teacher session can take more varied forms to suit the students' learning styles/. The number of tasks in the student session, however, is restricted to only one or two simple exercises depending on the ability of the students. This makes the construction task easier, more manageable and enjoyable but less intimidating for students.

### ***1. Song dictation***

The purpose of this activity is to sharpen students' listening ability in the pronunciation of shortened verb forms such as *I'm*, *I've*, *It's*, *I'll*, and the like, as well as the distinction between long and short vowels (/i/ and /I:/) in words like *coming*, *receive*, *free*, *still*, *ribbon*, *three*, *see*, and so on. The song used in the activity is "Tie a yellow ribbon round the old oak tree."

Students are first handed out the lyrics with the words missing. They are asked to go through the lyrics and try to guess the words in the blanks. The teacher then explains difficult words and lets students read the lyrics. This is followed by the teacher asking simple questions to check the students' overall comprehension of the song. Students can listen to the song three times: the first time purely listening and trying to work out what the missing words are; the second time filling in the gaps and the third time checking to confirm whether the answers are correct or not.

The teacher then discusses the answers with the students and practices pronouncing the words with them through further listening and singing with the tape. The next step is to help students understand more about the song by engaging them in creative writing tasks which involve placing them into different roles related to the characters in the song. For example, students may be asked to imagine themselves to be the husband and wife in the song. Half of them will be the husband who will soon be released from prison and come home to reunite with his wife. Each of them is to write a letter to his wife to ask whether she will forgive him or not. The other half will pretend to be the wife who will each write a reply to the husband telling him what she feels.

Another writing activity can be done in groups. Each group will be asked to write a conversation between the husband and wife when they meet again. Students can express freely their ideas in the construction of the dialogue in a low anxiety environment. This will naturally lead to a role-play exercise during which students can further stretch their imagination through exposure to other students' work.

Students may be unable to replicate the whole session as the design for creative writing tasks might be beyond their abilities. They can definitely work on the filling in the gaps task. To minimize the pressure on the task, students may do it in groups. First, they have to choose a song they like for the exercise. Then they decide which language items they want for practice (for example, vocabulary, adjectives, pronouns and so on) and delete appropriate words in the lyrics. At this time, teachers will need to give feedback to students to ensure that what they have prepared suits the purpose before they actually present their work to their classmates. Based on the students' work, teachers may build up more exercises on creative writing or grammar tasks. Working on their own materials, students find learning more interesting and motivating.

## **2. Song reading**

This activity aims at developing students' ability to comprehend the literal meaning of the song and at the same time analyze the hidden message. It may be more suitable for advanced students and can be done in groups. The song used in the present activity is "Lemon tree".

The teacher first hands out the entire lyrics to the students with a set of comprehension questions. The teacher then plays the song to the students and gives them some time to do the silent reading focusing their attention on the questions which are geared towards the surface understanding of

the song. Students may work out the answers in groups in order to generate more conversation in English. The questions used in the activity are:

- 1) Who is talking in the song? (The father)
- 2) To whom is he talking? (The son)
- 3) What is the main subject of the song? (Lemon tree)
- 4) According to the father, what's wrong with the lemon tree? (The tree is pretty and the flower is sweet but the fruit is impossible to eat.)
- 5) Describe the girl the son met. (She was so sweet that when she smiled, the stars rose in the sky.)
- 6) What made the son forget about the father's words about the lemon tree? (The music of her laughter)
- 7) What happened after the girl left? (She took away the sun and left the darkness behind.)
- 8) Why did she leave the man? (She left him for another man.)

Students should have a general understanding of the song after they have completed the comprehension exercise. Teachers then discuss the answers with the students and focus on the development of the story in the song. The theme of the song may be introduced to the students, drawing their attention not only to the surface meaning of the song but also to the message it carries. This can be done by reflecting on the guiding questions below:

- 1) What does the lemon tree refer to? (love/temptation/woman)
- 2) What is the attitude of the father towards love? (never put your faith in love)
- 3) How is the father comparing love with the lemon tree? (Love is like a lemon tree which is very pretty but the fruit is too sour to eat.)
- 4) Should the son follow the father's advice? (Yes, this would help him understand more about the nature of love and not be easily cheated.)

There is more follow up work on the creative writing tasks. First, teachers may ask students to imagine themselves to be the son in Lemon Tree and write a story about some possible events in the song. Second, as the son in Lemon Tree, write a letter to his friend to describe his feelings of being deserted by the girlfriend. What advice will the son give to his friend? For the students'

session, they may follow the same procedure of reading a song by first comprehending its literal meaning and then analysing its hidden message. However, students may have difficulty in identifying an appropriate song due to their limited exposure to English. In this case, teachers may suggest a song for them to work on. For example, "Windflowers" may be a suitable song for this exercise. Students may construct the comprehension questions to look at the literal meaning of the song while teachers focus on questions that examine the underlying meaning and the creative writing tasks.

### ***3. Split song***

This activity provides an opportunity for the students to improve their comprehension ability through approaching a song in an interesting way. It may be done in groups to promote interaction among students. The song "Diary" is used for illustration.

Teachers first identify several stanzas which are suitable for this exercise. This is indeed a matching exercise in which teachers divide each sentence of the stanza into two parts and jumble the order of those on the right. Students are required to restore the stanzas to their original forms. Before doing the exercise, teachers may go through the difficulty vocabulary with students first. Here is the sample of the exercise:

After students have completed the exercise in groups, teachers may let them look at the entire lyrics to check their answers. They may also listen to the songs several times and learn how to sing it. The exercise may lead to more creative writing tasks. For example, students may be asked to imagine themselves to be the man in the song and write a composition to tell the reader something about the girl. They may also work in groups to write a conversation between the man and the girl, each telling one another their interests, background, plans for the future and so on. Students may find it easy to choose an appropriate song and construct the matching exercise. Teachers then add more exercises on creative writing to complete the activity.

### ***4. Word portraits***

This activity attempts to stimulate students' imagination through construction of a story based on the words given to them. The words are taken from the song chosen by the teacher. The song "I am a rock" is selected for this activity. Students divide themselves into groups to write stories for different stanzas.

Teachers first present isolated words from various stanzas in the song and put them accordingly into boxes. Each box consists of words taken from one stanza. Before asking students to write, teachers explain difficult vocabulary and demonstrate to them how a story can be made up. Here is the sample of the material:

Students then work in groups to develop their own stories, each group writing a story based on the words taken from one stanza. After they have finished, they present their work to other groups. Teachers let students compare what they have written with the story described in the song by handing out the lyrics and playing the song to them. Through such a comparison, students can broaden the vocabulary use in a wider context. This is definitely a simple design task which students can handle fairly easily. All they need to do is to identify a song they like and pick up appropriate words in each stanza for their peers to construct the story. Of course they

need to write a short story for demonstration purpose. The story construction task itself is already a creative writing task and so there is no need for teachers to build up more writing tasks in this activity. To complete the task, students have to utilize the four skills: listening and reading to understand the words used in the context of the song; speaking when interacting with other students in the discussion of the story and; writing when constructing the story based on the given words.

## Conclusions

The series of activities described above offer a great deal of advantages in promoting the learning of English, the greatest one being to stimulate students' interest and enhance involvement. The authors conducted the activities to a group of Secondary Three students in the form of an enrichment programme run fortnightly each in a one-hour session to boost students' proficiency in English. Students' reaction was that they showed tremendous interest in learning English through songs, particularly those chosen by them. They were very enthusiastic in designing exercises for their peers and felt great pride in chairing their sessions. The authors found that the activities had helped creating plenty of teaching materials through teacher-student collaboration. The materials multiply themselves three or four times after each teacher's session, with each group of students working together to produce their own exercises. Through the designing task, students became experts in their own areas and hence were more familiar with the language items they were learning. The deep processing of language input involved in the creation of new tasks had greatly facilitated the learning process.

The co-operation between teachers and students had enhanced the rapport a great deal. In the joint development of learning tasks, teachers were like the students' friends in the provision of feedback and input in the revision of materials. The interaction among students was also increased as they worked together to do the problem-solving tasks and design learning materials.

The song activities mentioned previously integrate the teaching of the four skills nicely. In each activity, students are required to listen very carefully to the songs in order to complete the tasks set for them, whether it is to fill in gaps or answer comprehension questions. In reading the song, they need to pay specific attention to a particular language aspect according to the demand of the task. For example, in "Split song," students have to comprehend the song very well before they can do the matching exercise. In "Song reading," students' comprehension has to go beyond the literal level to symbolic meaning to find the hidden message carried by the song. The group work naturally engages students in a great amount of conversation. Finally, because each song provides a meaningful context for writing, students can stimulate their imagination and practice their writing skills through creative writing tasks at the end.

The combination of materials development with the uses of songs can definitely enhance learner involvement. Teachers might find the activities outlined here suitable in a variety of teaching contexts: after school enrichment programme, extracurricular activities, ordinary classroom activities and so on. The design can be a relief for the overworked teacher who usually does not have sufficient preparation time for innovative classroom activities but wants to conduct his/her teaching in an interesting way to help students learn more effectively. The authors think that the

activities are able to diversify teaching methodologies and transform passive learners to active participants in the process of learning.

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Figure 1 "Lemon Tree" Questions
1. Who is talking in the song? (The father.)
2. To whom is he talking? (The son.)
3. What is the main subject of the song? (The lemon tree.)
4. According to the father, what's wrong with the lemon tree? (The fruit is impossible to eat.)
5. Describe the girl the son met. (She was so sweet that when she smiled, the stars rose in the sky.)
6. What made the son forget the father's words about the lemon tree? (The music of her laughter.)
7. What did the girl take with her? (She took away the sun.)

8. Why did she leave the son? (She left him for another man.)

Figure 2  
**General Discussion Questions**

1. What does the lemon tree refer to? (love/temptation/woman)
2. What is the attitude of the father toward love? (Never put your faith in love.)
3. How is the father comparing love with the lemon tree? (Love is like a lemon tree, which is very pretty, but the fruit is too sour to eat.)
4. Should the son follow the father's advice? (Yes, this would help him understand more about the nature of love and not be easily cheated.)

Figure 3  
Teacher's isolation of words from the first stanza

[illegible]

Figure 4  
**Teacher's demonstration on the first stanza**

It was a cold winter night in December. I went out to the dark, silent street after I had a bad quarrel with my father. The snow never stopped. I was lost in deep thought. The memory of my childhood came back freshly to my mind. Although my father was very poor, he always tried his best to make me happy. I was really an ungrateful child. It was better for me to come back to him and ask for forgiveness.